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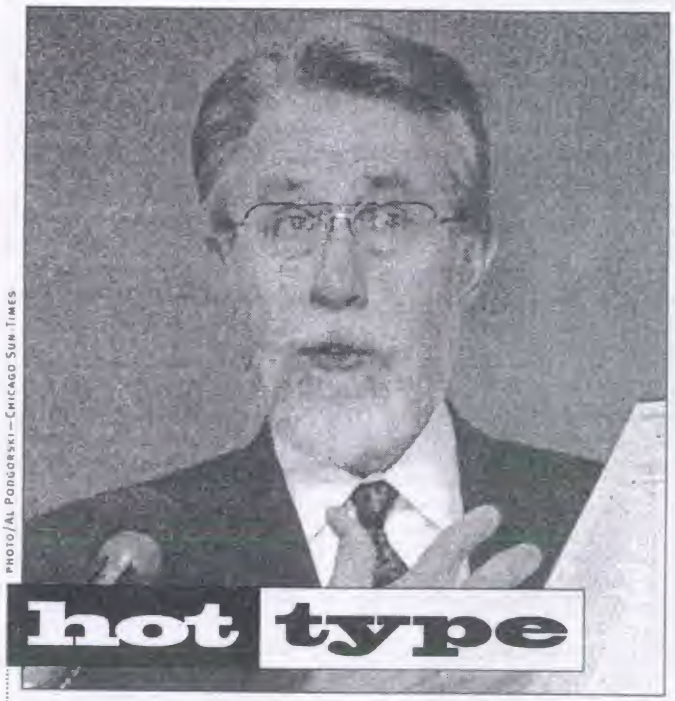

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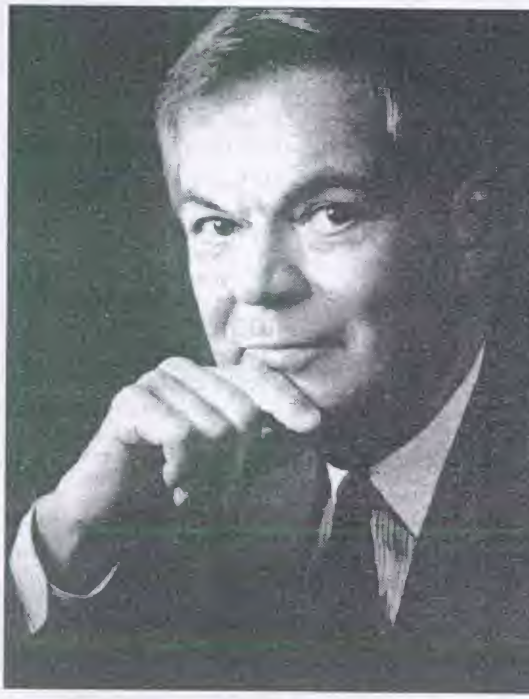

George Lundberg

By Michael Miner

Autopsy of a Lisagor

Connect the dots. Begin with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, follow the winding trail to the Lisagor Awards of 1993, and push on to the sacking of the editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* this January.

You might think these matters have nothing to do with one another, but to those with eyes to see, the ouster of Dr. George Lundberg from *JAMA* wasn't the display of thimble-skulled blundering the world's press made it out to be. No, it was poetic justice. For Lundberg's the one who seven years earlier masterminded the reporting that assailed and mocked critics of the Warren Commission. Kennedy conspiracists never forgave him. And given that the little episode wound up costing the AMA nearly a quarter of a million dollars, perhaps Lundberg's superiors didn't forgive him either.

Back in 1992 the conspiracists held the upper hand in the debate with lone-gunman theorists over who killed Kennedy. Pollsters were reporting that three Americans out of four believed in a conspiracy. Dr. Charles Crenshaw had just published a best-seller, *JFK: Conspiracy of Silence*, in which he insisted that while treating Kennedy in Dallas's Parkland Hospital trauma room he'd seen gunshot wounds that Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't possibly have caused. Then there was Oliver Stone's new movie, *JFK*, in which the conspiracy's tentacles reached all the way to Vice President Johnson.

In the name of truth and history, Lundberg decided to wade in. A former pathologist, he persuaded two of the physicians who'd performed Kennedy's autopsy that it was time to break their silence. In April 1992 Lundberg and one of his top reporters, Dennis Breo, spent two days interviewing James Humes and J. Thornton Boswell in a Florida hotel. "I am tired," Humes told Breo, "of being beaten upon by people who are supremely ignorant of the scientific facts of the president's death."

Humes and Boswell were the main story, but Breo also interviewed four Dallas doctors who'd been on the trauma team that worked desperately to resuscitate Kennedy at Parkland Hospital. And several weeks later he traveled to Switzerland to interview the forensic pathologist present at the autopsy. The May 27, 1992, issue of *JAMA* carried Breo's first two stories, and *JAMA* made the most of it. Days before the issue hit the streets, Lundberg and Breo held a press conference in New York to alert the world to its revelations. Lundberg was quoted dismissing Stone's film as "skillful film fiction" and Crenshaw's book as a "sad fabrication." The *New York Times* ran its coverage on page one.

JAMA had a choice to make back then. The journal could have let the doctors' testimony speak for itself. Instead, stirred by the movie, the book, public opinion polls, and perhaps by Humes's bluntness, Lundberg and Breo not only published the testimony but told readers what to think about it. Breo went so far in his main story as to quote Lundberg saying, "I am extremely pleased that, finally, we are able to have published in the peer-reviewed literature the actual findings of what took place at the autopsy table.... I completely believe that this information... is scientifically sound and, in my judgment, provides irrefutable evidence that President Kennedy was killed by only two bullets that struck him from above and behind." And Breo concluded his main article by scorning "the growing industry of conspiracy theories from people who are ignorant of the essential facts and yet purport to know how President Kennedy must have been killed."

The doctors interviewed in Dallas ridiculed Crenshaw. ("None of the four recalls ever seeing him at the scene," Breo reported.) One doctor commented, "The only motive I can see is a desire for personal recognition and monetary gain." Another called Crenshaw "dead wrong," and a third said, "It was so pathetic to see him on TV saying this bogus stuff to reach out for his day in the sun that I ended up feeling sorry for him."

Breo's last words in this article were: "This special report is our attempt to confront the defamers of the truth."

An interview with Dr. Pierre Finck, the forensic pathologist, appeared on October 7, 1992. Like Humes and Boswell, Finck insisted that Kennedy had been shot just twice and from the rear. The same issue carried an essay, "Closing the Case in *JAMA* on the John F. Kennedy Autopsy," written by Lundberg: "Based on solid, unequivocal forensic evidence as reported by Mr. Breo... I can state without reservation that John F. Kennedy was struck and killed by two, and only two, bullets fired from one high-velocity rifle."

Needless to say, *JAMA* didn't close the case. The fiery conviction that President Kennedy was ambushed by gunmen in the employ of immensely powerful and sinister forces won't be doused by the mere memories of a handful of men who know what they're talking about. Breo won a Lisagor in 1993 for his *JAMA* articles—but he landed in court when Crenshaw sued for libel.

When Lundberg was fired from *JAMA* a couple months ago, his admirers and critics agreed on some points. He was an editor who stirred the waters; he put out a journal that was topical and talked about. The sex survey during the impeachment hearings that cost him his job was a good example of Lundberg's eye for headlines. The assassination package had been another, but mistakes were made. For one thing, Breo had let stand the suggestion of the Parkland Hospital doctors that Crenshaw wasn't at the scene. Yet Crenshaw had been there, as

Breo would have known if he'd checked the full 26 volumes of the Warren Report, not just the summary. Even two of the doctors Breo interviewed had mentioned Crenshaw's presence to the Warren Commission. For another thing, despite the pummeling Crenshaw took in *JAMA*, Breo hadn't tried to interview him.

Crenshaw asked for millions of dollars in damages and settled for $213,000. As part of the settlement, he got to publish a one-page "commentary" in *JAMA* in May 1995. He used the space to regret that *JAMA* hadn't given him more room earlier and to repeat his claim that back in 1963 he'd seen an entrance wound in Kennedy's neck and an exit wound in the back of his head. On the next page Breo responded, pointing out that Crenshaw wasn't a pathologist, had played a very minor role in the trauma room, and by his own admission had seen Kennedy's neck wound for only a "fraction of a second." Breo didn't repent and didn't retract, and he asserted that the AMA paid off Crenshaw simply to avoid the cost of a trial.

As sometimes happens when the gods smile on a lawsuit, both sides have claimed victory ever since.

Then last November the Chicago Headline Club received a letter from a distinguished member making what he conceded was an "outlandish request." Harris Meyer wanted Dennis Breo's Lisagor revoked. "New information has come to light," wrote Meyer, "about grave flaws and unethical practices in the reporting and editing process that produced the winning entry."

The source of Meyer's new information was the 1998 book *Assassination Science: Experts Speak Out on the Death of JFK*, edited by James Fetzer, a philosophy professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth. One of Fetzer's guest experts was Crenshaw; another was Crenshaw's attorney, D. Bradley Kizzia. Crenshaw, Kizzia, and Fetzer each contributed an essay on the *JAMA* coverage, which Kizzia described as "masterfully conceived, slickly written, and cleverly worded to give the superficial impression of being based on scientific research." Quoting from the depositions he took from Lundberg and Breo for Crenshaw's suit, Kizzia made it known that Breo's articles hadn't undergone peer review, that Breo had no "burning interest" in the Kennedy assassination prior to 1992, and that Crenshaw's whereabouts in 1963 didn't much concern anyone at *JAMA*.

Kizzia asked Lundberg: "Was there an intent on your part . . . to create the impression . . . that Dr. Crenshaw was not on the trauma team?"

Lundberg: "No."

"Was it important to you as editor of *JAMA* to try to avoid creating that impression?"

"No."

When Lundberg and Breo held their press conference back in 1992, Breo said that Crenshaw wasn't mentioned at all in the summary of the Warren Commission. But the *New York Times* reported the next morning, still days before the *JAMA* interview with the Dallas doctors hit the streets, that there were "several references" to Crenshaw in the full Warren report. Lundberg told Kizzia that when he read that, he asked Breo to check. Sure enough there are, Breo reported back.

Kizzia: "Did you give any consideration to publishing a clarification on that point?"

Lundberg: "No. . . . We don't publish clarifications." We do publish corrections, he said. But Crenshaw "did not warrant a correction or a retraction."

Crenshaw's grievances had almost nothing to do with what mattered to history about Breo's reporting, which was that it finally told the story of the doctors who'd performed the autopsy. But on the strength of Fetzer's book, Meyer argued to the Headline Club that "the *JAMA* articles failed to meet the most basic journalistic standards of fairness and accuracy. . . . Failing to give people you criticize the opportunity to present their side of the story is the grossest kind of journalistic negligence."

So Meyer asked the Headline Club to do the unthinkable. Some things are simply over and done with, and an award given five and a half years ago is likely to be one of them. To revoke the Lisagor would be like stripping Al Pacino of his 1992 Oscar because, on second thought, all he'd done in *Scent of a Woman* was flash a ham bone the size of a bathtub.

But the Chicago Headline Club takes its ethics very, very seriously. This is the organization, you'll recall, that in 1996 launched an Ethics in Journalism Award to honor the trade's embattled saints. In fact, the ethics award that first year was given to none other than Harris Meyer, for "laying his job on the line by writing stories [for *American Medical News*] that were contrary to American Medical Association policy on Medicare and other health issues." *American Medical News* fired him, and Meyer then nominated himself for the ethics award.

When Meyer, being a formally

anointed martyr to the cause of scrupulous journalism, spoke on an ethical issue, the Headline Club was bound to listen. Yet there were problems. Meyer's martyrdom had come at the hands of the AMA, the organization he was now assailing. And when Dennis Breo won his Lisagor in 1993, Meyer was a defeated finalist—an awkward piece of history that Meyer dutifully pointed out to the Headline Club.

"Certainly there's no love lost between me and the AMA," Meyer told me, "but I would have been equally outraged if it had been the *Tribune* or *Reader* or *New York Times*. This was pretty egregious."

(Meyer was open about his entanglements, and I'll be open about mine. When the AMA fired Meyer I wrote about the matter, and he took a dark view of my suggestion that personality quirks, in addition to his steely independence, might have led to his banishment. Meyer, with David Protess of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, subsequently submitted a letter to the Headline Club newsletter, "Chicago Journalist," asking, who watches the watchdog? and requesting an investigation of the Hot Type operation. An investigation was launched and went nowhere, unless you count the lighthearted Q and A with me in the current issue of "Chicago Journalist." Yet despite signs that Meyer hoped to run me out of town, he has never hesitated to shine his light on others' iniquities for my benefit. He spoke openly with me about his role in the Dennis Breo affair.)

The Headline Club board assigned Casey Bukro, godfather of the ethics award, to study Meyer's charges. Bukro reviewed the Fetzer book and other documents provided by Meyer, interviewed Lundberg, and submitted a 1,200-word report, which included the following exchange.

Bukro: "Has *JAMA* been fair to Dr. Crenshaw?"

Lundberg: "I believe if you asked Dr. Crenshaw, he would say no. If you are asking me, the answer is yes..."

Bukro: "Do you still doubt that Crenshaw was present?"

Lundberg: "He was a young guy. He may have been there, but in the heat of the issue, he didn't know much. He may have played cleanup. But I doubt he played any significant role. I don't doubt his presence."

Bukro recommended that the award stand but suggested a reform. From now on, Lisagor judges should be reminded in writing that the Headline Club "expects entries to be judged on the basis of norms in fairness and accuracy, including giving people accused of wrongdoing a chance to respond in the original report. And, if necessary, judges should be encouraged to call editors or reporters to ask questions about how a story was covered, or why certain necessary information is not included."

The Headline Club board debated the Breo award at its January meeting and unanimously accepted Bukro's recommendations.

That wasn't the end of it. Ilyce

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Breo was immediately on the phone raging about prima facie libel. "I used language I shouldn't have used," Glink conceded to me. "I don't know what I was thinking when I wrote it." But while Glink prepared a correction for the next issue of the newsletter, her take on the Breo debate was making its way to James Fetzer.

On learning that the debate had opened and closed, Fetzer urged me to pursue the Headline Club board's decision to wash its hands of Breo. "If this had concerned coverage of a matter merely of local significance, perhaps this attitude might be appropriate," he offered by E-mail, "but it concerned one of the most important events in American history! I cannot imagine what the Board of Directors was thinking."

Fetzer poured out his heart to Glink. In his view, Lundberg had been fired for doing right—publishing a pertinent sex survey—but in 1992 he'd been hailed for doing wrong. Fetzer told Glink by E-mail: "You may know that many informed persons within the AMA and without found these articles offensive, not just on political grounds, but because they violated basic principles of scientific reasoning.... I find it extremely disconcerting to learn that The Headline Club, which had previously honored JAMA for its outstanding contributions in publishing these articles on the assassination of JFK, should not rescind its prestigous Lisagor Award when the series for which it was given has been exposed as fraudulent.... I cannot imagine how The Headline Club could deliberately tarnish its own integrity by compromising its most important function by failing to reveal this hoax. Its conduct in this matter is not merely dismaying to the general public but surely also reinforces cynicism toward journals and journalism. If this is its stance, it ought to disband, because it no longer fulfills the function for which it was founded. It no longer benefits the public good but betrays the public's trust."

Glink E-mailed Fetzer back: "Thank you for your comments. We will discuss your letter at the next board meeting."

Fetzer immediately wrote Glink: "Please know that I greatly appreciate your reconsideration of this issue." And he wrote me: "Since they are going to reconsider this matter, perhaps nothing more needs to be done about this for the time being."

I called Glink. She said they weren't going to reconsider anything. "We'll discuss his letter. I feel obligated to bring his letter forward," she told me. But Breo's Lisagor was a dead issue.

Breo would say almost nothing on the record about the assault on his integrity. His friendly advice to me was to find another subject. Don't carry water for the conspiracists, he said. "You have your own integrity to worry about." Lundberg and I missed each other by telephone but he did leave a message on my voice mail. "I don't think there's any story here," he said.

Today Meyer works for an alternative newspaper in Florida. He places himself in a line of independent journalists driven from the AMA in tumbrels. Lundberg was only the latest and biggest. "My impression is he was fired for bad reasons rather than good ones," Meyer told me. "He took plenty of gutsy stands, but where was Lundberg when I and others at *AM News* needed him? He was a part of that repressive machinery. He became de facto publisher of *AM News* in mid-'95, and I turned to him repeatedly for support when I was getting pressure from AMA honchos. Every time he rebuffed me. He had his reasons—he was trying to protect his editorial freedom at *JAMA* by throwing us to the wolves. He had no vested interest in us." ■